



On Pins and Needles: Acupuncture is not just for grown-ups.



By Kimbra Cutlip



My seventh grade, Michelle Gellis's son had spent four years on medication to treat his ADD, and he was sick

and tired of it. Acupuncture had worked for an eye condition and asthma in her younger son, so Gellis decided to try it with her son Tyler. "My son never sat still a day in his life, but as the needles were going in, he fell asleep," said the Fulton, Maryland mother of three. "It was shocking, because I'd never actually seen my son asleep during the day."

Within three months, despite his mother's protests, Tyler decided to go off his medication. "I told him he could try it only on the weekend," she said, "but when he got up Monday he didn't take it, and he was fine. He never took it again." Tyler, now 22, graduated from college in May.

An Ancient Art Still New to Pediatrics

Used in China for thousands of years, acupuncture involves placing tiny needles in the skin along invisible lines, meridians, where energy is believed to flow within the body. While not everyone experiences results as dramatic as Tyler's, acupuncture is proving to be an effective treatment for a variety of conditions. It has been gaining popularity over the past decade, but it is rarely used in this country to treat children. In 2008 the National Institutes of Health (NIH) reported that 3.1 million American adults received acupuncture in the previous year while

only 150,000 children had.

I first considered acupuncture for my daughter, Sienna, when she was seven years old. She had been given a tiny dose of adult blood pressure medicine by a specialist for her Tourette's syndrome. That kind of "off label" use of adult medicines is not uncommon in treating Tourette's because no one really knows what causes it, or how to fix it. The medicine didn't help her, and I wasn't terribly comfortable with the idea of it. Sienna hated it. We abandoned the pills, and I took her to see Annapolis based acupuncturist Dr. Dahoe Fang.

The first couple of treatments didn't seem to work, and we decided her tics weren't bad enough to warrant the recommended twice weekly visits. But by the end of fifth grade her tics were out of control. The kicking, hopping, arm flinging and head jerking made it hard for her to concentrate, and she could barely speak without interjecting sniffs and grunts mid-sentence. We went back to Dr. Fang ready to commit to regular sessions for as long as it took.

Energy and Chemistry, Does it Work?

"From the Eastern perspective, the idea is that there are blockages and imbalances in the energy force, called Qi (chi), that acupuncture helps to rectify," said Dr. Timothy Culbert. He spent ten years as the medical director for integrative medicine at the Children's Hospitals of Minnesota which runs one of the country's largest and oldest centers for pediatric acupuncture. "From a Western standpoint there is scientific evidence that acupuncture releases endorphins and cephalins, which are

some of the body's natural healing chemicals, to reduce pain amongst other things." Culbert said that medical research also shows acupuncture may directly influence the nervous system. Exactly how it works remains a mystery, but studies indicate it is a safe and effective treatment for a host of ailments including pain, nausea, headaches, sinus infections, seasonal and food allergies, asthma, depression and more. One of the concerns, however, is that most of those studies were done on adults. "There is a general paucity of research exploring the safety and efficacy of acupuncture in children," said Dr. Richard Nahin, a senior advisor at NIH's National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM).



According to Nahin, in one of the few areas that has been well studied the medical literature suggests it may prevent nausea and vomiting in children after surgery.

Nonetheless, there are no clinical guidelines for pediatric acupuncture, which may be why most pediatricians don't even think to recommend it. Doctors and parents may also shy away from it because of an aversion to needles or a sense that a child won't sit still through the process.

Getting Over the Needle Thing

"I was a little nervous that it would hurt the first time," Sienna said, "but there was no pain. I didn't even feel it." Although the needles are about as thin as a human hair practitioners may use acupressure instead of needles for children with extreme needle phobia. "We also tend not to use needles on patients who are younger than about four," said Sara Poldmae an Annapolis based acupuncturist with special training in pediatrics. "Sometimes children are absolutely fine with treatment and they're actually really excited about it," she said.

Even children with autism, which is often associated with low tolerance for sensory stimulation, are intrigued by

the needling according to Dr. Lana Warren. She is the vice president of clinical programs at the Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore, and she just concluded a study on acupuncture use with autistic children. Warren's results have not been officially reported yet, but all of the families voluntarily completed the full eight weeks of treatment and "several of the families continued to pursue acupuncture following the close of the study," she said.

No Panacea

Despite the success stories, acupuncture

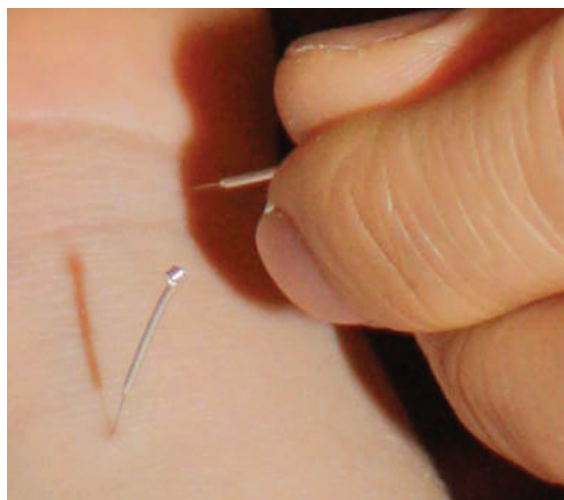
is not recommended as a replacement for western medicine, and it does not work for everyone. Nor is it always a singular means of attack. Fang prescribed a variety of herbs in addition to the acupuncture, and many practitioners use acupuncture in conjunction with other treatments including western medicine. Poldmae said she often recommends dietary or lifestyle changes for her patients. She said she can help many children eliminate medications for things like allergies and ADHD, but it is always done under their physician's care.

"I think there are definitely children that medication is 100 percent appropriate for and that I wouldn't be able to help," Poldmae said, "For severe ADHD I may be able to keep them on a lower maintenance drug and help make their life just a little bit more manageable."

The potential of acupuncture to reduce or eliminate medication appeals to many people because there are no significant side effects beyond an occasional mild bruise at the needle site. On very rare occasions, acupuncture can temporarily aggravate symptoms. That happened to Sienna when we tried the second time. Her ticks got worse for a few hours after each treatment, but we stuck with it, and within three weeks they began subsiding rapidly. We gradually reduced our visits three times a week to once every three weeks. After six months Sienna decided she was well enough to stop treatment all together. While she still has ticks, they are mild and rarely bother her.

Management rather than cure may be the key word in treating conditions like ADHD and Tourette's. For simpler problems, if a doctor has confirmed there are no underlying medical concerns, acupuncture may be the only treatment needed. In either case, a foray into the arsenal of ancient Chinese healers may provide a safe and welcome alternative to the pharmacy.

Kimbra Cutlip is...



Before You Go

1. LICENSED Make sure your acupuncturist is licensed. Contact the Maryland Board of Acupuncture for list of licensed practitioners: e-mail Penny K. Heisler heislerp@dhhm.state.md.us, or Cynthia Dobbins dobbinsc@dhhm.state.md.us

OR verify that a practitioner is licensed in Maryland at: <https://mdbnc.dhhm.md.gov/ACUPTVerification/default.aspx>

2. EXPERIENCED Call the practitioner's office first to find out if they have experience treating children and treating your child's specific condition.

3. INFORMED Always provide the acupuncturist with a complete list of medicines, vitamins and supplements your child is taking. Always inform your pediatrician that you will be seeing an acupuncturist.

OTHER RESOURCES Information on different styles of acupuncture and much more at Maryland Acupuncture Society <http://www.maryland-acupuncture.org/information.html>

Dr. Fang, treating the author's daughter, Sienna.